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ABSTRACT

Studies and observations of immigrants with limited dominant language literacy reveal their use of various literacy strategies to communicate with and function in the dominant society. One of these is the interpreter strategy whereby immigrants rely on their children to serve as cultural, linguistic, and informational mediators. This undertaking of adult responsibilities by immigrant children is referred to as the reversal of parent-child roles. This paper examines the mediation activities and information needs of immigrant children mediators (ICMs) and recommends strategies librarians can use to prepare ICMs to competently mediate for their family and friends by teaching them how to find relevant sources of information, to critically examine the sources of information available to them, and to consider mediation as a life skill. Partial results of one study and preliminary results of a second study are reported. The first study examined the role of immigrant children as cultural, linguistic, and informational mediators. The second study is currently being conducted; the results of 33 librarians, who are participants of a larger study on the role of librarians and educators as facilitators of immigrant child mediation, are reported. (MES)

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Immigrant Children Mediators (ICM): Bridging the Literacy Gap in Immigrant Communities

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Abstract

Studies and observations of immigrants with limited dominant language literacy reveal their use of various literacy strategies to communicate with and function in the dominant society. One of these is the interpreter strategy whereby immigrants rely on their children to serve as cultural, linguistic, and informational mediators. Sociologist Betty Lee Sung refers to this undertaking of adult responsibilities by immigrant children as the reversal of parent-child roles. This paper examines the mediation activities and information needs of ICMs, and recommends strategies librarians can use to prepare ICMs to competently mediate for their family and friends by teaching them how to find relevant sources of information, to critically examine the sources of information available to them, and to consider mediation as a life skill.

Paper

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Children play a significant role in facilitating the literacy interactions of their immigrant parents, relatives, and friends. An example of a typical situation this paper addresses was described in an article on Gloria Molina, a County of Los Angeles Supervisor, after her father had a work injury:

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> "She had to pay the bills and find out what we owed,Ó Diaz remembers. "She had to go in and talk to the doctors and translate for our mom. If the kids had problems at the school, she would call the school. She became the head of the household. She had to carry that load.Ó [1, p. 13]

In libraries serving immigrant communities, children can be observed with adults, interpreting for them and explaining things to them. These children who serve as immigrant children mediators (ICM) are called upon to perform adult responsibilities and carry out bilingual conversations, often requiring sophisticated vocabulary. Not only can the tasks be onerous, the role immigrant children mediators have is extremely influential within the family and sometimes extends into the community. In her study of Chinese immigrant children in New York City, Sung [2] observes this phenomenon and refers to it as the reversal of parent-child roles. She notes that

> Right after immigration, parents and children are at the same starting line. Neither speaks English, but within a few years the children will have attended school and become fairly proficient in English. At that point, the parents will turn increasingly to their children for help. Instead of the parents leading the way and instructing the child, the roles are reversed. [2, p. 183]

This paper examines the mediation activities and information needs of ICMs and recommends strategies librarians can use to prepare ICMs to competently mediate for their family and friends

by teaching them how to find relevant sources of information, to critically examine the sources of information available to them, and to consider mediation as a life skill.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Literacy studies of linguistic minorities and immigrant communities have identified strategies for coping and transitioning across socio-linguistic contexts (see for example Baynham, 1995 [3], Farr, 1994 [4], Hartley, 1994 [5], and Merrifield et al, 1997 [6]). Literacy strategies in immigrant communities include the use of an interpreter strategy in the form of formal and informal mediators; the use of the native language when there are linguistic similarities (e.g., English and Spanish); learning a limited set of literacy skills for routine activities, such as answering the telephone; use of ethnic services and media; and if necessary, avoiding contact with the larger community.

In Farr's study [4] on Mexican American families in Chicago, literacy, like other resources, was shared so those more proficient in literacy helped those less proficient, and was exchanged for other resources or favors. However, literacy was also perceived as "something apart, as something generally linked to formal schooling, as a technology to learn for use in their own lives." [4, p. 103] Thus, literacy was assigned a level of value. Similarly, in Hartley's [5] study of Pakistani Muslim women living in Brierfield, England literacy in English or Urdu, like other resources, was made available to family and community; children's English skills were respected, admired and employed when needed, and aspirations for their children were to be literate in both English and Urdu. Baynham's [3] a study of a Moroccan community living in the United Kingdom also identified literacy as a resource. More specifically, he found the community practicing an interpreter strategy that used formal and informal mediators of literacy. The use of formal mediators of literacy follows the practice in some countries of using a public scribe, who can be found in the marketplace and for a fee, will read, write, or type a document. Informal mediators include family members, neighbors, and friends.

In many immigrant communities literacy, like other resources, is made available to family and community but in some communities, there may be a limitation to the sharing of resources. The Hmong, is one such example. The use of traditional social networks has been transplanted by the Hmong to the United States. Their patrilineal clan system, made up of 20 clans, that

organizes Hmong society continues to integrate the Hmong community and culture in Philadelphia [7]. This kinship relationship is so strong and embedded into the social order that a clan member will find assistance from a fellow clan member within or outside their local geographical community. However, in the United States this kinship system is not always recognized by social service institutions which expect the Hmong to assist each other, even across clan kinship. Some Hmong who have few family or clan ties may look outward into American society rather than seek assistance from a Hmong of another clan.

To learn about the use of an interpreter strategy in ethnolinguistic communities Cheryl Metoyer-Duran [8] has studied ethnolinguistic gatekeepers. They are defined as individuals who typically operate in two or more speech communities (one English), and who link these communities by providing information. Monolingual individuals who operate within the context of two cultures can also be considered ethnolinguistic gatekeepers. They are formal gatekeepers if their job is to assist linguistic minorities (e.g., social workers) and informal gatekeepers if such assistance is performed on a voluntary basis (e.g., community leaders). Metoyer-Duran's study found that ethnolinguistic gatekeepers knew how to access information and used a diversity of information technologies. Her study provides a model of the gatekeeping process and how information activities are incorporated by adults who bridge two or more ethnolinguistic communities.

3.0 GOAL AND METHODOLOGY

This paper reports on partial results of one study and preliminary results of a second study, both of which examine issues relating to ICM[1]. The first solicits the perspectives of immigrant children mediators, and the other from librarians and educators who wish to facilitate immigrant child mediation. The results presented are those related to the goal of this paper, in other words, the data provide a basic understanding of the role of ICMs along with strategies librarians might use to facilitate the mediation activities of immigrant children.

The first study examined the role of immigrant children as cultural, linguistic, and informational (CLI) mediators. Immigrant children were defined as American- or foreign-born children of immigrant parents. A cultural, linguistic, and informational (CLI) mediator was a bilingual or multilingual individual who links two or more ethnolinguistic communities by: (1) facilitating intercultural communication through the use of interpretation and the conveying of cultural cues, (2) providing cultural explanations, and (3) imparting information. This individual facilitates the cultural adaptation process, reconciling differences in culture, language, and knowledge between individuals in two or more ethnolinguistic communities. The objectives of this study were to understand which activities are involved, how central they are to immigrant children's lives, how immigrant children manage to deal with them, if there is any significance related to gender and birth order, whether poor English language skills of parents is a common characteristic of immigrant children who are mediators, the range of knowledge and information they handle, and whether libraries play a role in their information seeking behavior. Interviews were conducted with immigrant teenage children. Korean and Mexican Americans were chosen as subjects because these populations have had recent immigration and would be easily identifiable in schools or youth organizations. The sample was purposive with potential participants attending schools or youth organizations known by or recommended to me or who would volunteer after hearing about the research. A participant was defined as a Korean or Mexican American youth who met the criteria of immigrant child for this study; has performed as a CLI mediator; and volunteered to be interviewed. Interviews were held in English, Spanish, or Korean, depending on the preference of the participants. The interview guide consisted of four areas: personal background, mediation activities, information mediation, and cultural mediation. Post-interview questions identified the gender of the participant and noted their fluency in English. When the interview was not held in English, the self-reported fluency of the participant was recorded.

The second study is currently being conducted. The results of 33 librarians will be reported. They are participants of a larger study on the role of librarians and educators as facilitators of

immigrant child mediation. The objectives of this study are (1) to share with librarians and educators who work with immigrant children that mediation is a critical activity in their lives, and (2) to explore with school and public librarians, and classroom teachers who work with immigrant students techniques that they apply in their respective work settings to assist these student in their mediation activities. The interview guide consists of two parts: facilitating ICM skills, and background of participant.

4.0 RESULTS

Seventy-seven immigrant children participated in the first study, of which 37 were Korean American (K) and 40 were Mexican American (M). They ranged in age from 9 to 29 years of age, with the average age being 18. One quarter of the participants (19/77) were male. The English fluency of three quarters of the participants was "goodÓ (32/77) or "excellentÓ (28/77). More than half of the participants were born in Korea or Mexico (48/77 = 62%); while 23% (18) were born in the United States and have lived outside the United States; 12% (9) were born and have only lived in the United States; and 3% (2) were born elsewhere.

4.1. MEDIATION ACTIVITIES

The immigrant children mediators were involved in a range of activities that require the use of two languages and performing literacy tasks on behalf of their parents, relatives, and friends in a diversity of environments. The mediation activities they performed include interpretation (oral use of languages) (95%), filling out forms (84%), physically taking parents/relatives/siblings to obtain services (71%), translation (written use of languages) (69%), getting information (69%),writing letters (66%), and obtaining services for parents (56%). Any difficulties experienced by the participants were associated with unfamiliarity with the topic and vocabulary in either language. The age when a participant first started to mediate ranged from age five to eighteen. They tended to assist their mothers more than their fathers.

4.2 INFORMATION MEDIATION

The types of information ICMs needed to obtain on behalf of their parents, relatives, and friends reflected the diversity of mediation activities they performed, ranging from information about education to doctors to banking. Information about schools was the only type of information more than half of the participants needed to locate, which was mainly obtained from the schools the participants attended. About half of the participants stated the need to locate information on medical services (35), home repairs (32), and recreation/entertainment/travel (37). The most frequently cited sources for information on (a) health services and issues were health care providers, telephone directory or book, and friends or relatives; (b) home repairs were the telephone book, and building manager/owner; and (c) recreation/entertainment/travel were the agency or business involved. Less than half of the participants indicated they needed to locate information about jobs, immigration, tax/government information, legal matters, business opportunities, banking, housing, car/car repairs, transportation, and emergency/safety matters.

ICMs did not impart all the information they obtained to their parents. Fifty-five percent indicated that they did not impart all the information stating that it was their decision to do so, that their parents did not need to know everything, and it was easier that way. However, a difference was observed between Korean Americans participants, of whom 70% did not impart all the information, 16% would depending on the situation, and 14% would impart all information word for word, and Mexican Americans, of whom 40% did not impart all the information, 33% would depending on the situation, and 28% would impart all information word for word. In general, the primary source of information most cited was individuals (friends, relatives) (26), followed by the phonebook (14), and then organization/person concerned (12). The second source of information most cited was individuals (15), followed by newspapers and printed materials (12), and then the phonebook (11). The third source of

information was broadcast media (12), followed by the phonebook (11), and then individuals (8). The library was not cited as an information source by nearly all participants (72/77 = 94%), of which 26 indicated they had thought of using the library for their mediation tasks. The most cited reasons for not using the library were that the library was just for reading, studying, and homework (15); the library doesn't have the information needed for mediation activities (13); and never thought of using the library for mediation activities (9).

4.3. STRATEGIES FOR LIBRARIANS

In the second study librarians suggested a diversity of activities they could do in their job to better prepare immigrant children to handle mediation activities with more ease and confidence, whether they are doing it in the library or elsewhere. Librarians were asked to consider the activities involved in CLI mediation as life skills that all children eventually need to perform and can benefit from learning at a young age. Thus, whatever their suggestions, they would benefit not only ICMs but all children. The activities recommended by 33 librarians (25 public and 8 school librarians) are reported here. The public librarians worked with children or young adult services and their job titles ranged from administrators to librarians to outreach librarians. The school librarians worked in middle (Grades 6-8) or high school (Grades 9-12) libraries, or as administrators in the school district offices. The recommended activities, which I have grouped, include:

1. Services - Programs (e.g., teen advisory) and other services should be developed that address the information needs of immigrant children and adults. Some examples include use of native language in public service areas, increase personnel and hours to accommodate the work schedules of immigrant families, school visits for both children and adults, bibliographic instruction that goes beyond use of the library for reading and school assignments, including coverage of specific information resources frequently used by ICMs, such as the phone book, mass media, and individuals, and offering of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

2. Resources - Materials, in English or other languages, addressing the information needs of immigrant communities should be included in the collection. If they are not available, they should be created by the library or publishers should be informed of these needs.

3. Outreach/partnerships/marketing/promotion - Outreach to and participation in schools, community organizations, and businesses are needed to establish partnerships in order to address the information needs and goals of immigrants. Marketing to develop user-centered services is needed as well as promotion of these services in ethnic media sources, and community and business organizations. Promotion can be in the form of an advertisement, commercial, word-of-mouth, brochure, pathfinder, bookfair, or display.

4. Facility/Environment - The physical layout of the library and service-orientation of the staff will make the library welcoming and easier to use. For example, institute signage or labeling in native languages, compliment children on how well they are doing with their library searches, and encourage parents to learn English and to use the library so they can carry out their own tasks.

5. Advocacy - Leadership, commitment, and awareness of the information needs of ICM should exist at all levels of staffing and administration. Information on ICMs and their needs should be shared among all library employees so (1) that they can be more open to these non-traditional information needs of children and young adults, who are gathering information for others, or (2) that some traditional services can be adapted for other user groups, such as bilingual storytelling as a family activity for immigrants. An example of commitment from administration is an increase in funding to address ICM needs, and from library staff would be librarians willing to step in and assist with mediation so children can look up materials for their own purposes. An important area for advocacy would be to encourage and inform publishers of the need for materials for ICM.

6. Staff Development - Librarians need education and research on immigrant families and communities, and to acquire additional skills, such as a second language, in order to better communicate and serve immigrant communities.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Immigrant children mediators serve as important sources of information and interpretation for linguistic minorities who are then able to gain access to information only found in the dominant language and mainstream institutions, and to communicate with English monolingual speakers in order to acquire goods and services not available in ethnic communities. They are involved in various activities and need information at their finger tips and with a quick turn-around time. Three sources which were most often used were individuals, the phonebook, and the media. The use of these sources, and the advantages and limitations should be taught. The fact that ICMs don't cite libraries as a top source of information should be addressed. Libraries need to do a better job at imparting information about all areas of service beyond recreational reading and homework. These include information about youth development, such as teen health, dating, and career information, as well as information about areas linked to the needs of ICMs, such as education, health care, home repair, and recreation/entertainment/travel. An important aspect about ICMs that needs recognition is their influential role in deciding whether to impart all or selective information to their parents, relatives, or friends.

ICMs are a great asset to their parents and community but great expectations are imposed on them because of the circumstances in which they find themselves. They have to not only develop their own identities as young adults and enjoy their childhood but they also have to take on adult tasks at an early age, some as young as five, and to function within two different cultural milieus, that of their ethnic community and that of U.S. society.

This work has shown that we need to think more broadly in not only expanding services to immigrant children but to immigrant adults. By performing their own tasks they can not only become self-sufficient but fully engage in their distinctive roles of parents and children. As we adapt our library services, we provide information for all immigrants to empower themselves and allow them to engage in all aspects of their new country.

ENDNOTE

1. These studies were partially supported by grants from UCLA's Academic Senate, Asian American Studies Center, Institute of American Cultures, and Urban Education Studies Center

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